

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 189

CS 206 799

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TITLE Basic Problems in Planning and Conducting Student Writing Conferences.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (33rd, San Francisco, CA, March 18-20, 1982).
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Organization; Higher Education; *Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Student Conferences

ABSTRACT

The areas composition teachers must address when developing a sound system of conferences with students include defining the conference, scheduling, preparing, conducting the conference, and keeping conference records. There are four general kinds of conferences: (1) the diagnostic conference for discussing students' writing experiences and particular strengths; (2) the brainstorming conference for informally exchanging ideas; (3) the detailed critique conference, designed to give students a sense of how they can edit and substantially revise their manuscripts; and (4) the workshop conference, during which students discover options for revising and in turn begin to sense their individual "style" or "voice." Fifteen minutes per conference appears to be a minimal duration for tending to business and making the students feel they have received individualized attention, and holding at least four conferences per term allows use of each of the four conference types. Students and teachers alike must be "primed" for a conference, and both should write down one or two questions or problems to initiate the conference. Regardless of the kind of conference being conducted, certain basic procedures should be observed, including breaking the ice, inviting the student to raise pressing questions, reinforcing the student's strengths, and discussing key concerns about the writing. A good conference recording system is index cards, with biographical information on each student and space to record the "minutes" of each conference. (HTH)

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BASIC PROBLEMS IN PLANNING AND CONDUCTING
STUDENT WRITING CONFERENCES

Let me begin with an excerpt from my teaching journal dated a few
years back:

After eleven students, one after another, my voice has
gone ragged. I've swallowed just about one cup of coffee
per student, and I'm starting to claw grooves into my
metal desk. The anxiety, though, isn't all caused by
near-lethal doses of caffeine; rather, the old doubts
are plaguing me again: are these conferences accomplish-
ing anything worthwhile?

When I first started using conferencing as part of my freshman compo-
sition course-plan I merely assumed that the very opportunity for students
to discuss their writing on a one-to-one basis would make the time well-
spent; consequently I did virtually nothing to prepare for them. I would
let the students air any questions they might have, then I would elaborate
a bit on the comments I had made on their last essay, and return the essays
to them. End of conference.

The problem with that kind of conference should be evident: it does not
accomplish enough. Gradually I discovered that I could offer considerably
more, in spite of the limited time; of course, I also discovered the need

to plan ahead and take a more systematic approach to the design and execution of individual conferences.

What, then, are the problem-areas teachers must face if they are to develop a sound conferencing system? I have isolated five:

1. Defining. What is a writing conference anyway? What kinds of writing conferences are there?
2. Scheduling. How much time should a teacher allot for each conference? How many conferences should be scheduled per term?
3. Preparing. How should students prepare for an upcoming conference? How should teachers prepare?
4. Conducting. What are the stages of a typical conference? What is the student's role? the teacher's? relative to the specific conference objective?
5. Recording. What is the best method of maintaining a conference record for each student?

DEFINING

Generally speaking, a writing conference is an encounter session at which the individual student (or small group of students) takes the opportunity to raise and discuss with the teacher issues unsuitable for the classroom. Such issues commonly include specific difficulties encountered by students when struggling with a given writing assignment; they also include matters of a more private nature, such as an unnatural fear of making grammatical errors, of "saying something stupid; or students may need to test out an idea or strategy before committing it to paper, or seek help in

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overcoming a mental block. These individual problems simply do not receive the attention they deserve, mainly because they fall outside many teachers' paradigm of writing or writing pedagogy. As for small-group conferences -- these are useful for less personal, more specialized matters, such as small-group workshopping, preparation for panel discussions, and so on.

Lester Fischer and Donald Murray, in their article, "Perhaps the Professor Should Cut Class," (College English, 35 /1973/, pp.169-73) suggest that we should get rid of the classroom altogether, on grounds that students are kept from solving their own problems. I disagree, simply because not only is the classroom a very efficient, time-saving means of getting fundamental information across to students, but it can also double up as a workshop in which students may gain valuable experience critiquing the rough drafts of their classmates' essays.

Our definition also needs a classification scheme. I myself identify four kinds of conferences:

- a. The nuts 'n' bolts or diagnostic conference, for discussing students' writing experiences, along with their particular strengths, earlier gleaned from a diagnostic essay and grammar/usage exam.
- b. The brainstorming conference, for tossing about ideas in a relatively informal manner; discussing heuristic procedures that would enable the student to brainstorm independently for topics, position-statements, developmental strategies, etc.
- c. The detailed-critique conference, a "product oriented" conference designed to give students a sense of how they

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can copy-edit and proofread, as well as substantially revise, their manuscripts.

- d. The workshopping conference, during which students discover options for revising and in turn begin to sense their individual "style" or "voice"; all those elusive matters -- coherence, sufficient development of topic sentence or of thesis, "originality," can be closely examined and discussed. NOTE: Workshopping conferences should be a supplement to, not a substitute for, classroom workshopping. Students need to be evaluated by their peers (their most accessible audience), and they need the experience of offering criticism. This, as I mentioned earlier, is why we must never dispense with the classroom when teaching writing.

SCHEDULING

Determining the number of conferences per term, or the duration of a given conference, can be difficult, particularly when one is teaching three sections of composition at a time -- a situation calling for the scheduling of seventy-five students several times during the term -- a total of anywhere from 225 to 375 or more separate conferences!

Faced with such a task, teachers often will opt for the blitz -- the three-minute variety advocated by Dawe and Dorman.¹ I myself do not favor, on psychological grounds, this type of conference; three minutes just does not seem to be enough time to give students the sense of receiving individual attention. There is a "rushed" atmosphere about it all. We often spend more time with students when they stop to see us after class, come to think of it.

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While I hesitate to prescribe an "ideal" duration for conferences, I have found that fifteen minutes is minimal for tending to business and making the student feel that he or she has received individualized attention equal in importance to fifty minutes of non-individualized classroom instruction.

I also hesitate to prescribe an ideal number of conferences per term. Four seems to me a sensible number, if only to utilize each of the conference types that I've outlined above. .

PREPARING

Students and teachers alike must be "primed" for a conference. Before conference time, encourage your students to

- jot down one or two questions or problems regarding their writing, and to raise these questions during the conference.
- review material relevant to the particular conference objectives. For example, if the conference will emphasize workshopping a first draft, tell them to reread ~~their~~ drafts prior to their appointment, looking for problem areas and possible solutions.
- express their feelings about writing: what they hate and like about it, where they think they need more help, how writing can possibly be useful to anyone such as they, who are preparing for careers in data processing or forestry.

Now what about your role in the preparation? First, jot down the key points you want to raise with each student; second, review the student's general background and character. Some of your students will be tense or

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unsure of themselves during conference; some will want to "take over"; others will simply remain indifferent. Knowing ahead of time how a student is likely to behave will help you be more tolerant, and even give you time to think of appropriate new strategies.

CONDUCTING

Here we come to a thorny set of problems indeed: conducting a conference, like writing poetry, is an easy thing to do badly. Every student brings a different set of circumstances -- which, after all, is the reason why we conduct conferences in the first place. If you use the same approach for every student, you may as well save your vocal chords and abandon conferencing altogether.

The very readiness to work in the context of each student's particular needs is important, and students need to sense your sincere involvement in their problems -- lest they promptly dismiss them as trivial.

Regardless of the kind of conference being conducted, certain basic procedures should be observed²:

1. Break the ice. Get up from your chair to greet the student warmly. Motion for the student to be seated -- and the chair should be alongside your own, rather than on the opposite side of your desk. This makes workshoping a lot easier, and it suggests your willingness to work closely with the student.
2. Next, think of ways to set the student at ease -- perhaps with some idle chitchat, just enough to signal informality.
2. Invite the student to raise a pressing question. Here is your opportunity to discover what the student is most concerned about, and whether or not the concern is justified.

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3. Reinforce strengths. One need not be a behaviorist to recognize the common sense behind giving each of your students, weak or strong, praise for strong or potentially strong passages. Even problematic writing such as inflated, jargony expressions may reflect a genuine fascination for language rather than a desire to distort or cover up vacuous ideas. Errors in syntax could easily reflect a writer's daring to test out new syntactic possibilities, rather than a lack of aptitude for syntax. At least give unconfident students the benefit of the doubt for the time being.

4. Raise the key concern. Every conference session should possess, as Poe said of the short story, a singular effect. This can translate into a major problem with a rough draft, or a persistent rhetorical problem such as choppy sentences or illogical development of the thesis. It is important to get students to respond actively and critically to this key problem -- to realize why choppy syntax (let us say) is a problem, and how it can be dealt with in the future. Getting students to respond to their own work during a brief conference can be achieved in two ways: by having them read their work aloud and by asking them to suggest and (time permitting) try out a possible revision on the spot. Spontaneous revising is good exercise.

RECORDING

Record-keeping is an important means of using time efficiently, especially when you must confer with seventy-five or more students per

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term. But what is the best system to use? I recommend 5 X 8 index cards, with the student's name, local address and phone number, major (or possible major), and home town in the upper left-hand corner. Beneath that, the following information should be recorded:

1. diagnostic exam scores
2. declared areas-of-interest regarding language and communication.
3. extracurricular interests and hobbies
4. writing strengths
5. particular areas in need of improvement

Then, allot space for jotting down the "minutes" for each conference. Be certain to record the date, and indicate how actively the student participated (a number system of 0-4 will do).

You may also want to consider the following questions in order to get usable background information for conferencing; these are suggested by Charles Dawe and Edward Dornan in their textbook, One to One: Resources for Conference-Centered Writing (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), p.5:

Where did you graduate from high school?

What courses in English did you take?

Other than textbooks, what books have you read during the last year?

Do you work? How many hours? At what?

What are fifteen subjects you might like to learn about? Write about?

In conclusion: students gain more insights into the composing process more rapidly when their personal writing needs are dealt with through a systematic conferencing program. By making a special effort to resolve the inevitable problems conferencing presents to the full-time classroom teacher, such a program will be more apt to succeed.

NOTES

1. "We hold our conferences in regularly scheduled classrooms, so we have no problem with arranging for special facilities. We also require students to attend all class sessions . . . What do they do while they're there? They write. Of course, we meet with individual students one at a time." (Charles W. Dawe and Edward A. Dornan, Resources for Conference-Centered Writing [Boston: Little, Brown, 1981], p.5.)
2. Compare my procedures with those of Rosemarie Arbur ("The Student-Teacher Conference," College Composition and Communication, 28 [1977], 338-42.):
Engagement (making the students comfortable; clarifying the purpose of the conference), problem exploration (guiding students into discovering their writing needs), problem identification (emphasizing the key weakness in each student's paper), agreement to work on the problem, solution, (beginning the assignment in question during the conference), and termination.